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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the unequal status of women in academic life from the ideological framework of the women's movement and issues a call to action to change this position. The paper discusses the following issues: (1) persons in the majority culture highlight the differences between them and the minority by exaggerating their culture; (2) the imbalance in numbers causes people to be preoccupied with how to behave toward each other; (3) most curricular materials effectively eliminate women or perpetuate sex role stereotyping; (4) universities that engage only one half of its population in its governance, conduct, and exchange of ideas lack a balanced viewpoint; (5) women academics are victims of sexual harassment, which also impacts on women's equality; and (7) the movement of women into equal ranks in the academy is a threat to its very existence as a patriarchy. The paper concludes that women must take it upon themselves to protest unequal treatment and sexism in their workplace, and they must do this in spite of the prevalent cultural taboos against questioning the practices of the academy. (Contains 15 references.) (JDD)

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Women in Academe:
Historical and Sociological Perspectives

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"Women in Higher Education: Progress and Prospects" panel
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Academic women do not share equally with men the benefits of academic life. In fact, there is growing evidence that women in the academy are even less equal than are women in other areas of employment.

One of the reasons this inequity continues to exist is the culture of the professoriate. A central value of this culture dictates the open and unbiased exchange of ideas, an exchange that is purportedly guaranteed by the sacred cow--academic freedom. On the surface then, discrimination of any kind is anathema to the academic creed and we all collude to ignore its existence, conspiring together to maintain the integrity of the profession.

This conspiracy exists despite the voluminous body of research that examines this discrimination and provides compelling evidence of the second class status of women in our profession. Yet the masquerade continues and we all participate at some level, for to shed our masks of denial would necessitate a radical change in the very nature of the professoriate. And such a change is threatening to all stakeholders in the academic enterprise.

But nothing short of such a revolution will allow women equal partnership with men in the academic community. Nothing short of re-inventing the policies of hiring, tenure and promotion will accomplish gender parity in the professoriate. Nothing short of blowing the whistle on the wide-spread discrimination of women and in the process dispelling the myths of meritocracy and academic freedom will do.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to examine the unequal position of women in the academy from the broader ideological framework of the women's movement, and to issue a call to action to change this position.

Women are outsiders. Women continue to be underrepresented in the faculty ranks even though student populations have reached gender balance. Despite the passage of numerous federal laws and regulations to equalize opportunities for women in higher education in the 1970s, academics are predominantly male with women representing only 27.6 percent of all faculty members. (DePalma, 1993). This figure was actually higher in 1930 when women represented 32.5 percent of all college presidents, professors, and instructors (Graham, 1978).

The consequences of one kind of person (women) occupying so few positions among the majority of another kind of person (men) should not be ignored. In Men and Women of the Corporation (1977), Rosabeth Moss Kanter details how minorities or tokens are viewed and treated by the majority. As part of a contrast effect, persons in the majority highlight the differences between them and the token by exaggerating their culture. For example, if five men and one woman are sitting around the conference table before a meeting, the men may emphasize their maleness by discussing sports or telling sexist jokes. "Ironically, tokens, unlike people of their type represented in greater proportion, are thus instruments for underlining rather than undermining majority culture" (Kanter, 1977, p. 223). Extreme politeness, especially in the form of apologies, is another way that men may subtly remind a woman that she is different from them and has disrupted the flow of things or caused interruptions in normal communication.

In addition to this contrast effect, tokens are in the spotlight because they stand out from the rest of the group. Although this visibility can help one's reputation when things are going well,

it is stressful to be always on stage.

This disproportionate representation of women on faculties defines and shapes the ways that people respond to each other. The imbalance in numbers causes people to be preoccupied with how to behave toward each other and that takes attention away from the task at hand.

The small number of women on the faculty also adds to the "chilly climate" that women experience in the academy (Sandler, 1991). If male professors are the norm because of their numbers, then female professors are the abnormal. This perception can create confusion in students, especially male students who may have little experience in dealing with professional women or women in authority roles. Being confronted by the rare female professor, a male student may resort to behaviors he uses with women in social situations and engage in sexual teasing or flirting (Sandler & Hall, 1986). Male students' attitudes may be reinforced by male faculty behaviors toward women in general and female professors in particular.

The curriculum itself adds to the marginality of academic women since most class materials effectively eliminate women or perpetuate sex-role stereotyping. For example, women are grossly underrepresented in public speaking texts and public address anthologies. Three recently published public address anthologies devote only 95 out of 1515 pages to works by women (Campbell, 1991). Advocates for curriculum revision point to the institutionalization of sexism through academic discourse and traditions. "Curriculum revision combats institutionalized sexism by incorporating or 'mainstreaming' research by and about women into existing courses" (Peterson, 1991, p. 60).

The most ambitious attempt to deal with curricula sexism is the evolution and growth of women's studies programs over the last 20 years (Chamberlain, 1988). And although women's studies programs and concomitant feminist scholarship have emerged on campuses nationwide, they have yet to exert any substantial influence on the traditional (sexist) curriculum.

Feminist scholarship challenges the basic assumptions of the traditional curriculum by inventing alternative paradigms and ways of knowing that are threatening to stakeholders in the status quo. Dervin (1987) asserts that feminist scholarship gives women a voice, a voice that is much needed by social scientists and other academics. "We need to hear the voice, most simply, because the voice represents over fifty percent of reality. To leave it out is in essence to leave that reality unheard and unknown" (p. 113). The speed of acceptance of feminist scholarship is, however, directly related to the number of women in faculty positions since women are more likely than men to be sympathetic to women's studies and the new paradigms such approaches invite.

The final argument to support more equal numbers of women in the academy is one frequently heard in organizational theorizing--the value of diversity. In the ideal, universities are nurseries of divergent opinions and viewpoints, encouraging of debate and the passionate exchange of ideas in the search for truth and knowledge. And yet women, who represent more than half of the population, are excluded from participation or offered only limited participation. Any enterprise that engages only one half of its population in its governance or conduct is one that must lack a balanced viewpoint.

And so even with the passage of federal laws, the societal pressures of the women's movement, and the establishment of feminist scholarship, women remain the few among the many in universities. Graham (1975) claims that the history of women in academe through the twentieth century is one of increasing marginality. A body of literature has emerged over the past decade that corroborates her charges (Schwager, 1987).

Women lack power. A related issue to the numbers discussed above is the lack of power that women in the academy have vis a vis their male counterparts. In the academic culture, one's power, or the ability to get things done, is directly proportionate to one's position in the hierarchy. Women are found in the lower ranks of the academy when tenured and in even greater numbers in the powerless positions of adjunct or tenure track lines.

Only 11.6 percent of full professors nationwide are women and the numbers in the most prestigious universities are even worse. In the Ivy League schools, women represent only 10 percent of full professors (DePalma, 1993). In a New York Times interview, Mary W. Gray, professor of mathematics and statistics at American University in Washington reasoned, "What it comes down to basically is a reluctance to believe that women are as good as men. Generally, it's much worse in universities than in the corporate world because academics are so arrogant we don't think anyone can tell us what to do " (p.23).

Women have more difficulty with promotion and tenure than do men. Theodore (1986) provides some reasons for refusing promotions of women to full professor in her sociological study of women as campus troublemakers. According to her research, women are told they have not published enough or that their publication outlets are not "prestigious" enough. Some women in the study were told that they

could not be promoted because they taught only undergraduate courses. An all too frequent reason is a lack of a "collegial spirit". "A woman seeking promotion may have a formidable publishing record and a national scholarly reputation, yet be labeled a 'difficult colleague' or 'disruptive to the functioning of the department' or a 'loner never mingling with the rest of us' without justification in most instances" (p. 57). (Theodore's study documents 470 cases of discrimination from 1970-1983 and addresses all areas of academia where sexism and discrimination prevail.)

Because of their lower status, women are not privileged in the powerful trappings of academic life--serving on important decision-making committees, having access to research grants, sabbatical, release time from classes, etc.

Universities claim to function as meritocracies that reward excellence in teaching, scholarship, and community service. In reality, however, universities mimic other organizations by rewarding those members who "fit in." In Scaling the Ivory Tower: Merit and its Limits in Academic Careers (1975), Lionel Lewis studied the realities versus the claims of academic life. He concluded that the most important element in both hiring and promotion of faculty was "fitting in". Clearly women and people of color are excluded from assimilating into the mainly or entirely white, male, middle-class academic culture.

Kanter (1977) uses the term "homosocial reproduction" to describe the practice of promoting or hiring similar others. People in power "carefully guard power and privilege for those who fit in, for those they see as their kind" (p. 48). The hierarchical structure

of organizations, dependent on power and control for its maintenance, fosters homosocial reproduction since so few make the rules for so many. The continuation of control depends on the smooth transference of power to like-minded others.

In Beyond Power (1985), Marilyn French describes the educational environment as a "hierarchy primarily concerned with power, with maintaining its own power, and with teaching students to adapt, in whatever way, to power as the highest good of our society" (p. 388). Along with this teaching comes the unquestioned acceptance of those in power positions.

And thus the nature of hierarchy prohibits women's access to power. "Women scholars are not taken seriously and cannot look forward to a normal professional career....They tend to be discriminated against in the academic profession, not because they have low prestige but because they are outside the prestige system entirely" (Caplow & McGee, 1965).¹⁶

A discussion of power in any organization must acknowledge the role that sexual harassment plays in maintaining the power differential. Women academics are victims of sexual harassment just as are women in all other work situations. The Journal of Applied Communication Research devotes its November 1992 issue to the examination of this issue in the communication professoriate.

Theodore's (1986) study is replete with examples of the subtle and blatant harassment of faculty women. "Harassment having sexual overtones is also part of the daily order of faculty women's lives. Examples abound: A woman is 'a stupid cunt,' 'a nice piece of ass,' or has 'the most sumptuous body in the department. The offenders are male administrators and colleagues of all ages, with department heads coming in for a heavy share of the blame" (p. 24).

Recent events have brought sexual harassment to national attention at all levels of government and business. The incidence of sexual harassment in academe and its resultant effect on women's equality must be addressed candidly and non-defensively. The cultural trappings of the university, however, may not nurture that discussion.

Women mean change. Just as the women's movement is a threat to the status quo at large, so is the movement of women into equal ranks in the academy a threat to its very existence as a patriarchy.

The sexism that academic women encounter mirrors that of women in all aspects of society. The battle for equal rights continues. In Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991), Susan Faludi details the history of women's rights in this country as a series of victories with subsequent defeats caused by resistance from the status quo. She identifies four different time periods when women's rights gained force, and then lost momentum because of backlashes. During each of those four periods, she describes how the academic community contributed to the backlash. Universities have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

So we cannot wait for our universities to benevolently advance the case for women within the academy. That has not happened with any great impact over the past century as is painstakingly documented by researchers and historians. We must, therefore, take it upon ourselves to protest unequal treatment and sexism in our workplaces. And we must do this in spite of the prevalent cultural taboos against taking such actions, against questioning the practices of the "unquestionable" academy.

The only way to achieve equality in the academy is to protest inequality--collectively, loudly, and continually. Collective actions by women in the past have proven that we can resist in a meaningful way. According to Faludi, in the past two centuries when women "have had a clear agenda that is unsanitized and unapologetic, a mobilized mass that is forceful and public, and a conviction that is uncompromising and relentless", they have won their battles. (p. 456).

Women must lead the protest; we must become the campus troublemakers in our battle for equal rights within the academy. To ignore the discrimination practiced against academic women is to condone and encourage it.

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